

Home & Away with Robert Walshe



DESPITE the bad press that online hotel review sites have received lately, the majority of people still visit and trust Trip advisor and other hotel review websites when it comes to planning their holiday.

A recent survey asked its 80,000 subscribers, "Do you trust hotel reviews on Tripadvisor and other similar travel sites?" The results showed that 87% of people will still visit one of these websites to help them when choosing their accommodation.

Meanwhile Qatar Airways, the national carrier of the State of Qatar has started daily flights to Rwanda's Kigali International Airport. Joining the airline's aggressively expanding route map, Kigali is the third destination launched by the carrier so far this year and latest to the African continent.

In February, the airline began services to both Azerbaijan and Georgia. Operating via Entebbe, Kigali becomes Qatar Airways' 17th route in Africa, joining its ever-growing global network that currently spans 112 destinations.

Further expansion is planned across East Africa during 2012 with new services to Mombassa, Zanzibar and Kilimanjaro.

Rwanda is fast emerging as a growing economic centre, forming strong trade links with Europe and Asia Pacific, thanks largely to its rich mineral resources.

For passengers traveling on Qatar Airways, they will have convenient access from the airline's expansive route network to Rwanda, via the airline's strategically positioned Doha hub.

Key feeder markets include India, Australia, China, the United States and United Kingdom.

Weekend Hotspot

The Japanese owned, five star Hotel Okura Amsterdam has put together a new range of enticing packages this season. Until 31st August 2012 guests can take in the works of Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh and see some of his masterpieces with a special Van Gogh package.

The city's Van Gogh Museum holds one of the largest collections of the painter's works, including his Japanese inspired Blossom paintings, and features a series of changing exhibitions throughout the year. The Van Gogh package costs from 255.00 Euros (\$188) per room, per night and includes a one night stay for two people, breakfast buffet at Le Camelia restaurant, admission into the Van Gogh museum and an 'Amsterdam information package' containing maps and flyers for events in Amsterdam.

Diamonds are almost certainly forever, especially in Amsterdam which has been known as the 'City of Diamonds' for almost 400 years. Explore the historical diamond factory of Gas-san Diamond with the Hotel Okura 'Brilliant package' and be treated to an exclusive behind-the-scenes tour to see the expert diamond cutters and polishers at work as they create the now world-famous 'Amsterdam Cut'. The Brilliant Package costs from 270.00 Euros (\$225) per room, per night.

The Netherlands is a country of bicycles and cycling is the best way to see the city of Amsterdam. Explore the city with the locals and discover its hidden alleys and paths with The Hotel Okura Biking Package. The package costs from 257.00 Euros (\$214) per room per night and includes a hearty buffet breakfast in Le Camelia restaurant to get you started in the morning, one day's bike rental and

the Amsterdam information package with maps and details of events in the city.

For food lovers the Hotel Okura is a gastronomic delight with a choice of award winning restaurants. Serre restaurant opened last year to offer dishes inspired by the hotel's two Michelin star restaurant, Ciel Bleu and enables diners to get acquainted with the essence of Ciel Bleu's cuisine. Serre's Bib Gourmand Package costs from 316.50 Euros (\$264) per room per night and includes a delicious three course Bibendum menu in Serre Restaurant, overnight accommodation and breakfast in bed the next morning.

You can also embrace the colours and fragrances of Amsterdam this springtime with a visit to Keukenhof, the country's largest flower garden. Keukenhof has been a tourist favourite for over 60 years and with more than 7 million flowers on display, visitors will have the backdrop for the perfect photo. The Keukenhof package costs from €279.00 per room per night and includes a one night stay in any room type, breakfast buffet in Le Camelia, transport to Keukenhof and admission to the Keukenhof.

Full details from www.okura.nl Aer Lingus depart Dublin five times daily to Amsterdam Schipol. For best rates see www.aerlingus.com or Easyjet ex Belfast International twice daily. www.easyjet.com

Weekly Best Buy

If you want a relaxing holiday which combines walking, sightseeing and spirituality then taking a Camino Ways pilgrimage could be just for you.

The Camino Primitivo, or Original Way, is the first pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and to the remains of St. James.

The route, which is split

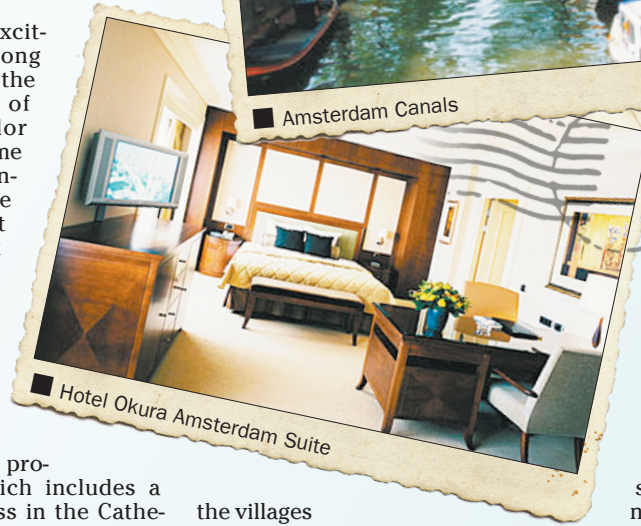
into 2 walking sections, one of 10 nights and one of six nights, is quiet and unspoilt. Sights along the route include the Walled City of Lugo, the Embalse de Salime, which is the largest Spanish dam, and of course, the Cathedral de Santiago.

Another exciting site along the route is the Cathedral of San Salvador which is home to a Romanesque statue of Christ that dates back to 100 years prior to the Camino.

While on this pilgrimage, you will take part in a religious programme which includes a pilgrims mass in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. There is also an evening mass every night, at 8pm, in



Amsterdam Canals



Hotel Okura Amsterdam Suite

the villages and towns which includes special benedictions for the pilgrims.

During the trek, you will stay in accommodation, on a half-board basis, which has been hand-picked by the Camino Ways team. Camino Ways, the walking and cycling holiday specialists are now offering this pilgrimage holiday from just €590pps. www.caminoways.com

Home and Away Extra

KEMPINSKI Hotels has announced its re-entry into Latin America with the signing of a management contract for a new luxury resort in Colón Province, Panama. Kempinski now has an active pipeline in the Western Hemisphere, including projects in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Rio de Janeiro. The new property is in a prime location on the coast of the temperate waters of the Caribbean Sea, near the town of Portobelo on the Northern Isthmus of Panama. Situated in a natural reserve, surrounded by rainforest, approximately an hour drive from Panama airport the beachside resort will feature 106 luxurious rooms and suites – all with ocean view. Furthermore 75 Kempinski Residences are planned from which 40 are directly located at the sea. The entire hotel complex will be built over several levels and connected by terraces. The heart of the resort is a plaza, where restaurants, boutiques and entertainment will be available. An extensive pool and spa area as well as watersport facilities will round up the offers. The beautiful beachside resort is scheduled to open in late 2015. www.kempinski.com

Meanwhile Shangri-La Hotel, Paris is proud to announce that its two gastronomic restaurants have been awarded stars by the 2012 Michelin Guide. With the publication of this year's edition, Shangri-La Hotel, Paris becomes the only luxury hotel in France to boast two gastronomic restaurants recognized by the Michelin Guide, a feat made all the more exceptional by the fact that this distinction comes less than one year after each restaurant's opening. The French gastronomic restaurant L'Abeille, under the direction of Executive Chef Philippe Labbé, has been awarded two stars and the Chinese gastronomic restaurant Shang Palace, headed by Chef Frank Xu, has received one star. www.shangri-la.com

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Pet's Corner...

with Kathleen Murray

What can we learn from animals?

HUMANS sometimes have an inflated ego when it comes to our own importance and intelligence yet we get so many things wrong. What could we learn from animals that could make our own lives better? Animals don't feel sorry for themselves for a start. If animals get injured they feel pain but not pity for themselves.

A woman brought me a little kitten years ago. The kitten fell out of the engine of her car when she stopped and it wasn't able to walk. One leg was badly injured. The woman couldn't keep her as she was on her way to work so I said that I would take her

and get her treated and then find her a good home. She was a very pretty little kitten and was happy to get some affection. Her treatment involved having her leg and shoulder blade removed and she looked like a train-track from the amount of stitches she had put in her.

I called her Martha after a woman that always had cats when I was growing up. Within a day of her operation Martha was walking around on her 3 legs, adjusting her balance so that she could move about with more ease. As it was a front leg she only had one leg to hold onto things with and

to pull herself up with. A couple of days went by and Martha could now jump up onto a chair. She still behaved as if she still had 4 legs in her mind. Her body would twitch as she tried to use the missing leg. One day she decided to jump from one chair to another and forgot that she only had 3 legs and missed the chair. She landed on the floor bewildered.

She got up and tied it again. The second time she made it. From then on Martha was unstoppable. She climbed trees, caught mice and fought her corner with neighbourhood cats. She was never afraid to

try new things. After a year or so (I kept her), a stray tomcat arrived in our garden. He was wounded and in pain. His tail had to be removed as it was broken. Martha was not impressed with this new house guest at all and made her feelings known to him. We expected him to leave when he was better but he didn't. He wooed Martha every day and regardless of her outright rejection of him, he persevered. As Martha was neutered and so was he it was not a romance. Eventually, after some time Martha accepted him. They became great friends. They curled up together at

night and lay in the sun together between hunts during the day. His name was Pav. I called him that after Pavarote because of the high pitched vocal sounds he was making the day I found him under the hedge.

Pav used to go away for 2 weeks every year. I never knew where he went but when the 2 weeks was up he would appear on the windowsill at 9pm as he did every other night waiting to be taken in for the night. He wouldn't settle until Martha was in as well. He was a better timekeeper than Martha. This went on for several years until one night,

Martha didn't come home. After a week of looking for her and a week of listening to Pav crying for her every night we found out that she had been killed on the road. Pav was not the same after that. He became withdrawn and he was killed on the same road 2 weeks later. It was very sad. My neighbours knew him before I ever met him and were very fond of him. One of them buried him for me. He was a neighbourhood cat with a very sweet nature... so you see we have a lot to learn from animals about suffering, getting on with life, relationships, death.... and so much more.